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# **Teacher Education and Professional Development in Belize: Developments and Challenges**

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In the last decade teacher education in Belize has received much attention as successive governments have sought to reform and improve the education system. The educational reforms, the underpinning assumptions and their merits require a detailed analysis but that is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper focuses on teacher education and it limits itself to outlining the developments the challenges and possible directions in the future as a way of making sense of what is going on and initiating a discussion that might help to shape the future. Making sense of what is going on is a huge task on its own because policy documents are not readily available. One has to go through many people before one eventually finds a person with such documents and even then access is not guaranteed.

## **The Nation**

Belize is a British Commonwealth country in Central America. It has a land area of 8886 square miles and a multi-ethnic population of 230,000. Forty-one per cent of the population is under 14 years of age. Belize is a relatively new nation having gained independence from England in 1981. It is a developing country with a struggling economy due to trade liberalization and the loss of preferential markets for its sugar, citrus and bananas that are the base of the economy

## **The Education System**

The education system of Belize consists of eight years of primary school, four years of high school and a few options at the tertiary level. There is a system of junior colleges and a new university that offers first degrees in education, commerce and engineering. Pre-school is mainly available in the larger urban areas.

Primary education is free and compulsory between the ages of 5 and 14. There are 284 primary schools and only 75% (54,616) of the possible students within the compulsory age range are participating (NHDAC, 1998). According to the Education Statistical digest the percentage has increased by less than 5% in the last year. Secondary level education in contrast is not compulsory, government pays tuition but schools charge additional fees. There are 33 schools but they hold less than 50% (11,720) of Belizeans aged 15-19 years (NHDAC, 1998).

The education system is managed through a church-state system. The Ministry of Education is charged with setting the national curriculum, examinations, and formulating policy. The partner church is in charge of the general administration of the schools including hiring and firing teachers. Government manages 42 primary schools and 9 secondary schools. The rest are managed through a partnership with a church. Government spends about 22% of its recurrent budget on education. Ninety-two per cent of that goes towards teachers' salaries (Education Statistical digest, 1999). It pays 100% of the teachers' salaries and up to 70% of capital projects at primary level. At the secondary level it pays 70% of the salaries 100% of the tuition, and up to 70% of capital projects (National Human Development Report, 1998). Private schools of which there are only 4 high schools and 27 primary schools receive no government funding.

## **Teaching and Teacher Education**

Two things must be kept in mind to understand the system of teacher education in Belize. The first is that teacher education in Belize is going through various stages of reform. The second is that Belize has not had a history of pre-service teacher preparation. Traditionally teachers have entered the profession with no

professional training and as a result there is a large percentage of untrained teachers in the system and this is one of the strongest shaping forces in teacher education.

At the secondary level teachers have traditionally been hired with the minimum qualification of a Junior College diploma the equivalent of an "A" level education. This has meant that teachers had an understanding of the subject but not professional education. In 1986 however the establishment of the University College of Belize (UCB) changed the situation.

UCB began offering first degrees in education with concentration in Mathematics, English, Biology and Chemistry. The program consists of two years after junior college. Half of the courses are taken in education and half in the content area of specialisation. A practicum of one semester must also be completed. UCB offered the opportunity for practicing teachers to upgrade their qualification. It also pushed young junior college graduates hungry for university education into teaching given the limited choices it offered. The program has improved the supply of teachers in some areas but there is still a shortage of teachers especially in Chemistry and Physics. Although UCB has become part of the recently formed national university, the University of Belize (UB), secondary level teacher education has escaped reform. The faculty of education under UB will continue to offer the same programs.

Teachers at the primary level have traditionally been hired with as little as a primary education and then trained on the job. In recent times the practice has improved slightly. With an increase in the supply of high school graduates most new teachers are now hired with a high school diploma.

Until 1992 BTTC (Belize Teacher Training College) offered a three-year teacher training program that consisted of two years of study and one year of internship and therefore known as the "two-plus-one" program. This program was essentially to train teachers already in the profession. Teachers attending the program received study leave with pay from the Government who also paid for a replacement. Entry into this program required a high school diploma with passes in Caribbean Examination Council (CXC)2 exams in certain subject areas or a First Class Teacher Certification. Entry however was not automatic as placements in the program were limited.

BTTC also offered a three-stage self-study program for teachers with only a primary certificate to qualify for entry. The self-study program took teachers through three levels the First Teacher the Second Class Teacher and the First Class Teacher. Through independent study and sitting of exams, untrained teachers could obtain their First Class Teacher Certificate required for entry to BTTC.

In 1992 the BTTC program underwent major changes under BPED (Belize Primary Education Development Program). The self-study program was discontinued and the "two-plus-one" was replaced with a new program. This new program consists of two levels. Level one which is completed while on the job and level two which is an intramural program

Level one consists of five semesters (two and a half year) that teachers complete extramurally while on the job. They attend a one-month session during the summer holidays and receive face-to-face instruction on subjects such as English, measurement and evaluation, physical education, mathematics and study skills. When they return to the classroom in August they continue with the program as distance students by completing a set of modules. They are placed under a tutor who supervises, assists and guides them through the modules. The tutor visits them once a month at their schools to observe them teaching and implementing some of the practical activities that form part of the modules. The tutor also coordinates half-day workshops and group study sessions. To successfully complete level one, students must complete each subject successfully.

Level two is a one-year program (two semesters plus summer).. At the successful completion of level two they receive a diploma and are recognised by government as fully trained teachers. This diploma can be upgraded to a degree through UCB's program inherited by the Faculty of Education.

## **Reforms**

The changes to the primary level teacher education came as a result of a World Bank Sector Review in 1989 (World Bank, 1989) and a Staff Appraisal in 1991 (World Bank, 1991). These reports became a base for many

of the reform projects that Belize is implementing.

About teacher education the Bank argued that the delivery program was fragmented, inefficient, plagued with poor performance, was irrelevant and was in fact a barrier to increasing the number of trained teachers. The World Bank observed that only 45% of the 1941 primary school teachers were trained. These were distributed in such a way that only 35% of rural teachers were trained compared to 64% of urban teachers.

The Bank noted that there was a high failure rate in the training program, only 13 per cent of teachers taking the First Teacher exam and only 10 per cent of those taking the First Class exam were successful. It saw the high failure rate as a barrier to increasing the number of trained teachers. It argued that this was especially so in the rural areas where the academic background of teachers is weaker. It also saw the length of the teacher education program as a barrier to increasing the percentage of trained teachers. It argued that the "two-plus-one" program that took teachers out of the classroom for too long contributed to slow growth in the percentage of trained teachers especially in the rural areas where replacements for teachers are difficult to find.

Noting that there was a high turnover of teachers it concluded that poor access to teacher training had demoralised young teachers. It proposed a new system that would "improve the competence of teachers, reinforce their professional identities and attain more efficiently a fully trained teacher work force" (World Bank, 1991 p.19, Annex 5). The Bank proposed to achieve this by "strengthening BTTC and other units like CDU (Curriculum Development Unit) to deliver training in the districts and to provide support for teachers; putting greater emphasis on training in professional skills; undertaking a program of professional upgrading; and introducing mandatory pre-service training for new teachers" (World Bank, 1991, p.19, Annex 5).

The Primary Education Development Project was a direct result of the Bank's reports. Among its goals BPED included improving the efficiency of teacher training; enhancing the relevance and quality of teacher training; and increasing the percentage of trained teachers in primary schools to 80% (Ministry of Education, 1999b).

### **Handbook & Board rules**

Other reform efforts that arose out of the World Bank reports include the "Handbook of Policies and Procedures" (Ministry of Education, 1998) and the Education Rules (Ministry of Education, 1999a). These documents outline the roles and responsibilities of teachers and principals, ministry of education and education councils and the policies of the Government regarding teacher licensing, provision, school financing, operation and administration. These two documents have a history of more than ten years and have just recently been signed.

One of the most important issues for teacher education touched by the documents mentioned is the issue of compulsory licensing. All instructional personnel will be required to have a license to teach in pre-school, early childhood, primary and secondary schools. A full license requires academic and professional training. The licensing policy can be seen as a response to the World Bank's suggestion that pre-service teacher education be mandated for new teachers. However, given the large number of untrained teachers, the compulsory licensing has been controversial. The second draft of these policy documents stated that the expected minimum requirement is a Bachelor's degree or its equivalent. It also stated, "the lack of adequately trained applicants should not be the cause of lower standards" (Ministry of Education 1998, p.73). The final document however the minimum requirement has been lowered to a Level One Certificate for primary school level and an associate degree for lower secondary school (Ministry of Education, 2000).

According to the signed Handbook "all persons teaching ... at the time these Rules come into force shall be automatically granted a Permit to teach for a period not exceeding one year while the application for license is being processed" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p.42). After the first year a provisional license will be issued to teachers who do not meet the requirements and five years during which they would have to upgrade their qualifications. This measure will increase the demand for teacher education services. The question then is whether there are enough providers, whether UB can provide these services or whether other providers may be required.

The policy also contains a condition for maintaining the license. It stipulates that teachers will need to complete 120 hours of professional development over a period of five years, obtain satisfactory annual appraisals in the

last three years and maintain a professional development record of the last five years. The mandated professional development will obviously increase the demand for such services but there isn't a concrete plan how these services will be provided. This might require additional providers other than UB or CDU especially in the districts.

### **BESIP & UB**

The government is at the moment preparing itself for BESIP (Belize Education Sector Improvement Project) another reform project to be funded by the World Bank (Ministry of Education, 1999d). Directly relating to teacher education this project aims to develop and implement school-based learning support services; introduce better quality and effective delivery of teacher and staff training programs; develop and implement individual school based secondary education improvement plans; support the integration of Belize Teacher Training College into the new Faculty of Education and develop its capacity; make District Education Centres (DEC) functional to provide support to district primary and secondary schools; and improve Monitoring and Evaluation of education quality and efficiency through the establishment of a school inspectorate.

According to a report being prepared by the ministry of education (Ministry of education, in preparation), under BESIP, funds will be provided for the establishment of the Faculty of Education. It will include the improvement of teacher training and the assessment of teachers and students at the primary and secondary levels. It will also provide funding for a unit that will provide research and technology support for the faculty and distance education. The Faculty of education aims to provide in-service courses and programs and develop a culture of research and scholarly work. The goals of BESIP are noteworthy since they respond to many of the pressing problems of the system but its effectiveness will yet be seen.

### **Problems & Challenges**

The reform projects being implemented by the Government give an idea of the problems and challenges that confront teacher education in Belize.

**The first** and most obvious challenge in the field of teacher education is the large percentage of untrained teachers especially at the primary level. The number of primary level teachers stands at 2064 but only 49.8% are fully trained. At the secondary level there are 754 teachers. Fifty-four per cent are university graduates but only 60% of them have a professional qualification. The distribution of trained teachers is uneven. In the urban areas 71 per cent of primary school teachers are fully trained in contrast to only 51% in the rural areas. Given that most of the untrained teachers are in the rural areas, a corollary challenge is making teacher education services available.

BPED attempted to address the problem of untrained teachers but as is evident the problem continues to be a challenge. BPED was completed in 1999 but a final report has not yet been produced. Compared to 1992, eight years ago, when the percentage of trained teachers stood at 45% there has only been a 4.8% increase. Admittedly there are 10.7% who have completed level one and they would only have one more year to go to become fully trained. However even if these "almost trained" teachers were taken into account the increase is only 15%. BPED's target was to bring the percentage of trained teachers to 80% so obviously it has failed to meet its target. The urban-rural distribution of teachers has seen some change but uneven distribution continues to be a challenge. The 1999 Statistical Digest reports that over 50 per cent of teachers are in rural areas but only 51% are fully trained compared to 71 per cent in the urban areas. The percentage of untrained teachers in the rural areas has decreased by 14% and in the urban areas it has been reduced by 7%.

Some of the factors that contributed to BPED's failure to meet its target may be the number of trained teachers leaving the profession but there are no statistics on this. However, the trend would not be surprising given that teaching as in many other countries is not as rewarding financially and is becoming more stressful. The World Bank is for example promoting an increase in the student teacher ratio, and at the high school level an increase in the number of teaching hours. There is also a lack of resources at schools. A recent study of secondary schools indicates that at the secondary level only 35.7% of the schools have up to date teaching and learning materials (Ministry of Education, 1999c). Often primary school teachers claim that they have to take money out their pockets to purchase material. The situation where teachers may be leaving the profession is further

compounded by the attitude that policy makers have towards teachers and their associations. In Belize policy makers tend to be cynical about teachers, they reflect a lack trust in them and tend to blame them for the ills of the education system.

Another factor that prevented BPED in meeting its target is the continued hiring of untrained teachers. This practice is understandable because Belize still does not have a system or a culture of pre-service teacher education. In addition the profession fails to attract candidates strongly enough for them to pay for their own training. Government has traditionally paid for the training of teachers as they were already in the profession. It is more economically wise for a person interested in the teaching profession to try to get into the profession and wait for training.

A third factor affecting BPED's success is that in the new teacher education program it takes teachers up to four years to become fully trained. It is at least a year longer than the "two-plus-one". This issue is worth noting given that the Bank saw the system as unable to increase the level of untrained teachers due in part to its length. The Bank may have been more concerned with saving money. The "two-plus-one" program was seen to be costly given teachers had to be paid leave and a replacement had to be hired. In the new program teachers only have to leave their job for one year. From an economic rationality the program is a success but the fact remains that it has failed to meet its goal.

A **second** challenge facing teacher education relates to professional development. The main focus of the teacher education has been the training of the large number of untrained teachers and this is understandable. Limited attention has been given to ongoing professional development for those that are already trained. The task of providing teacher education, however, does not end with the certification of teachers. Professional development is a very important part of teacher education. Providing professional development especially for rural teachers is therefore a challenge in teacher education. There has been no system of ongoing professional development and consequently no culture of professional development. BTTC, the Curriculum unit, and the teacher's union have occasionally organised sessions of professional development but these are sparse and few. Belize will have to seriously look at providing professional development for its teachers nationwide. At the moment there are very limited opportunities for professional development and there is no institution that dedicates itself to professional development.

The matter of on-going professional development is particularly important given the poor performance of students in national and international exams. One of the aims of the reform projects of Belize is to improve the performance of students in these exams and this requires professional development. The recent Primary School Exam (PSE), for example, has clearly indicated that the area of mathematics education is in dire need of improvement. Only 38% of students taking the examinations scored over 50%. These results prompted the government to act. The ministry of education contracted the university to deliver a three-week course for math teachers. The program was poorly attended as the Ministry of Education failed to notify teachers ahead of time. They were notified about four days before the program began. . Moreover, the resource constraints meant that course tutors only received a half-day orientation. The program was a failure. It had to be cancelled after a couple of days in most districts. This professional development program reflects the reactive impulse of the Ministry of Education and the preference for one-of type workshops as these are cheaper and reach a larger number of teachers. However this form of intervention has limited effect. Teachers themselves know this. Professional development that is successful, although longer and more expensive, is usually one that is sustained, involves teachers intimately and is school based.

Belize needs to make an effort to provide ongoing professional development and find creative ways of doing so. The establishment of professional associations, small grants to teachers to promote innovation and teacher conferences are some ideas that could be explored. In Belize there are few professional associations. These can usually provide a forum for teachers to reflect on practice, update their knowledge and make contacts and therefore, can provide professional development opportunities for teachers. There is a need for these organisations. Perhaps there is also a need for a way for teachers to communicate with each other whatever successful practice, or problems they are facing. A journal for teachers would be worth exploring. All of these require resources of course and these are not readily available.

The government is aware of the need for professional development. As noted earlier it is decreeing that teachers must engage in professional development to maintain a license. Certain policies of the government express a desire for a cadre of teachers that are reflective, continuously innovating and growing. However the top-down approach of decreeing that teachers must engage in professional development or must reflect is counterproductive. Teachers must be involved in their own development, opportunities must be provided and the proper climate where teachers can engage in critical inquiry of their practice and innovation must be established. However, the message is often contradictory in that at the same time the government is decreeing that teachers must engage in professional development, it is increasing the classroom sizes, and the working hours. A reflective practice can only flourish in a context of trust and respect, in a context where there is time and opportunities for reflection.

A **third** challenge for teacher education is the need for research and development. It is necessary for teacher educators to understand the problems that plague schools and teachers to formulate relevant programs to prepare and support teachers. There is, however, very little research and development when it comes to education and therefore a poor understanding of the obstacles to achieving a quality education. The Staff Appraisal Report by World Bank (1991) and the report of the Dean of The Faculty of education acknowledge this need (Ministry of Education, in preparation). She indicates that the faculty of education must develop a culture of research. Certain practices such as the hiring of foreign consultants, however, do not promote local research. Government seems to have more trust of foreign consultants who miraculously seem to be able to understand the system and its problems and formulate solutions in a short time.

In developing a culture of research, teachers can play a major role. They have insights into the system and they must be encouraged to engage in their own practical research. This approach would not only provide information about the system but would promote innovation and professional development.

**Fourthly**, there is a need for well-prepared and motivated teacher educators to undertake the task at hand. The World Bank Sector Review notes that BTTC "has a shortage of qualified instructors" (World Bank 1991, Annex 5, p.6). The amalgamation of the University's Education department and BTTC and the hiring of new faculty through BESIP might address this problem.

**Finally**, there is the question of resources. The international trend is for Governments to spend less on education, to see it as expenditure rather than an investment, and to want more for less (UNESCO, 1998). The current reform programs in Belize seem to reflect this trend. They speak about improving quality and saving money in the same breath. Teachers at the secondary level, for example, are being asked to engage in professional development but their workloads and class sizes are being increased and their salaries are being frozen. Furthermore, many teachers are being refused study leave. Secondary schools are being asked to do something about repetition rates and low achievement while at the same time their budgets are being cut. In the last budget for example, most secondary schools' budgets were reduced. One school, for example, received sixty thousand dollars less which is equivalent to the salary of about two and a half teacher. The question of resources impacts on teacher education heavily and in various ways. It has, as was noted earlier, functioned as the underpinning rationality in restructuring the BTTC teacher education program; it shapes the kind of professional development that is delivered; and it affects the spirit in which teachers participate in professional development and teacher education.

## **Conclusion**

The dominating discourse affecting teacher education is that of change and improvement. It has lead to a reform of primary teacher training. It will lead to a higher demand for teacher education and professional development but it might also lead to a more stressful job and a lower teacher morale. The task of preparing and supporting teachers in such a context confronts teacher educators.

Educational improvement is complex, the factors are many and the problems can't be solved conclusively. Education cannot be improved through teacher education alone but it is an important element in sustaining change. Change is not an event or project but a sustainable exercise and largely sustained by teachers. Change, however, can only be sustained by teachers who feel trusted and respected, are highly motivated and committed,

and have the skills to investigate and improve their own practice. The challenge for teacher educators is therefore preparing and supporting such teachers while helping to create the environment of trust and respect where such practitioners can engage creatively with their task

To prepare the kind of practitioners needed for an improved education, teacher educators must become proactive in delivering services where they are needed, seek to understand the context in which teachers have to work and act to improve such context. They need to understand the educational problems confronting teachers and work with teachers to find solutions. Most importantly they themselves must engage in their own professional development. The establishment of a faculty of education under UB is a hopeful event. The extent of its impact, however, will depend on the availability of resources and the commitment and initiative of the faculty and its leadership.

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